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SUBJECT: Who's watching what: A snapshot of
Sri Lankan
television viewing habits

1. (U) SUMMARY. Sri Lankan Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera recently stated that he wished to see changes to the state-run media, particularly improving the quality of the very popular teledramas (soap operas) watched by millions of Sri Lankans. Recent surveys also indicate that most Sri Lankans receive their news primarily through TV. Following is an analysis of viewer habits based on surveys commissioned by the local office of A.C. Nielson in 2004 and by USAID in 2003. End summary.

SNAPSHOT OF THE SRI LANKAN TELEVISION SCENE

2. (U) REGIONAL BREAKDOWN: Data gathered by Lanka Market Research Bureau (LMRB), a local polling firm whose clients include the Sri Lanka office of A.C. Nielsen, indicate that the majority of viewers in the rural south and center of the country get their news via government-owned television broadcasts, whereas elites in Colombo tend to depend on Sri Lanka's independent broadcasters or international channels (via satellite feed or cable) such as BBC or CNN for their TV news. Residents in the north and east can receive either Indian television stations or Maharajah's Shakthi Tamil broadcasts, but have no access to the government-owned stations, as the broadcast "footprint" does not extend to the fullest reaches of that region. Additionally, a USAID-funded study done in 2003 indicated that overall 57 percent of Sri Lankans used television as their primary news source.

3. (U) Sri Lankans of all socioeconomic classes watched teledramas - especially in Sinhala or Tamil - much more than other evening programs. The LMRB study reported that they watched religious programming in English the least of all programs surveyed. While Sinhalese viewers across all socioeconomic groups had relatively high percentages of respondents who regularly watched news programming (between 50 and 75 percent), among Tamils the percentages were insignificant in all but the most affluent class. The research indicated that Sri Lankans in several age groups watched between 1.3 and 3 hours of television a day, a figure that spiked during the weekend. According to LMRB's research, individuals in the 15 to 34-year-old demographic watched the most television in general, but viewership dropped off later in life, except for that of news programming.

4. (U) As in many other countries, government-owned stations dominate the Sri Lankan television scene, but independent broadcasters have a significant market share and are gradually gaining in importance.

Government-owned stations include Rupavahini and the Independent Television Network (ITN), both of which broadcast in English, Sinhala and Tamil. Among independent broadcasters, Maharajah Broadcasting carries all three languages, whereas Swarnavahini is Sinhala-only. Estimates indicate that approximately 95 percent of Sri Lankans outside the north and east (which were not surveyed) have daily access to at least one television (Note: That figure would undoubtedly be somewhat lower if the impoverished and war-torn north and east were included in the data. End note) Many large companies have television in their break facilities, for example, and local restaurants will often have televisions that patrons can watch. Prime time for Sri Lankan viewers is from seven to eleven p.m., when news broadcasts and political talk shows with viewer call-ins are aired. Evening news broadcasts last twenty minutes apiece, with between one and a half to three minutes devoted to international news (and up to five for sports coverage).

TELEDRAMAS - KING OF PRIMETIME?

15. (U) The favorite programs in the prime time slot are "teledramas" - serialized dramatic programs in Sinhala or Tamil usually sponsored by large businesses. In remarks on September 14, Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera decried the content of teledramas, and stated that a three-member committee would be set up to regulate and evaluate teledramas and make sure that they were up to "high standards." No specific actions have yet been taken, however. State-run media rules prohibit explicit portrayal of sexual or violent scenes. However, a local NGO, the Alcohol and Drug Information Center, recently claimed there was a scene featuring alcohol, or an alcohol advertisement, every ten minutes on state-run television programs.

16. (U) Teledramas are so prevalent, in fact, that a recent survey done by local firm Survey Research Lanka indicated that teledramas were the highest-watched shows on every network operating in Sri Lanka. Next came the ubiquitous broadcasts of various cricket test matches, which claimed between 19 to 37 percent of viewers on average, while the nightly Sinhala news program ranked dead last. According to data from the Media Ministry, approximately 40 percent of Sri Lankans admit to watching at least one teledrama per day, whereas daily news viewership recorded as high as 70 percent in some areas of the island. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that many viewers tune into news programs to catch the highlights at the

beginning and then quickly switch to a teledrama, thus skewing reported viewership for both news programming and teledramas.

POLITICAL DEBATE ALSO HAS A PLACE

17. (U) While teledramas lead the ratings among Sri Lankans overall, Sri Lankan viewers with an intellectual bent aren't left out: three popular talk shows cater to those desiring debate over political and social issues. Viewers can call into these programs, one of which is hosted by former Minister of Economic Reform, Science and Technology Milinda Moragoda. One government-run network weekly debate show recently had as its theme current views of the present political situation, with five MPs who lost in the April 2 Parliamentary elections. Other topics of political debate have included freedom of expression and the current media culture, and a review of the current government after six months in office.

18. (U) COMMENT: While television news takes third place behind teledramas and sports coverage, it is nevertheless the dominant source of news for more than half the general Sri Lankan public. In contrast, only about 18-20 percent obtain their news mainly from newspapers. Television exerts a large influence on Sri Lankan public attitudes, especially toward international issues. Given the importance and influence of television in Sri Lanka, PD Colombo will continue to seek opportunities to place our material on TV and arrange for TV coverage of our different visitors and activities. Such an approach should help reach a broader audience than just the traditional elites.
END COMMENT.

LUNSTEAD